No. 29. On devout Behaviour in Church.

For a Country Congregation.

Genesis 28th, 16th.

Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not.

The careless and irreverent behaviour of many people in the house of God affects, with deep concern, all serious and well-disposed minds. Is it that they do not come with the actual design of worshipping God—or that they come because they observe others—or because they may as well spend an hour in Church as any where else, and therefore think themselves discharged from the obligation of devoutly supplicating God? Whatever be their motive, it is evident they do not consider themselves in the more immediate presence of Him, who is "jealous of His honor, and who will "not give His glory to another." All such, with too great reason, may say, with Jacob in the text— "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it "not. And he was afraid, and said, how dreadful "is this place! This is none other than the house of

"God, and this is the gate of heaven." That I may, by the bleſsing of God, excite in every irreverent Worſhipper the ſame awful ideas—that I may, by the aſsiſtance of Divine Grace, awaken in every careleſs breaſt the tremendous thought, that surely God is in this place, I will beg your serious attention, whilſt I shew,

Firſt, The motives and inducements that ought to bring us to the houſe of God. Secondly, The devotion and reverence with which we ought to behave in it. Thirdly, I shall point out some of the improprieties too often obſervable in our Congregations, and then conclude with a ſerious application.

Firſt, We come to Church to acknowledge Whoſe we are, and Whom we serve—to demonſtrate to the world and to ourſelves, that we have enliſted under the banners of the Lord—and that "whoever others may "serve, the Lord our God will we ſerve, and His "voice only will we obey." We come to return God our public thanks for creating, preſerving, and re-

deeming us from everlasting misery—to beseech Him to "give us those things that be needful for us"—and above all, to grant us the direction and assistance of His Holy Spirit, lest we fall a prey to our grand adversary the Devil. We come to church to confess our unworthiness—how little we deserve—how much we receive—to declare our resolutions of amendment, and to supplicate the Grace of God, to enable us to keep them.

I shall shew therefore, in the second place, the Reverence and Devotion we ought to feel in our hearts, and express in our behaviour, whilst we are in the church of God. "How awful is this place! This "is none other than the house of God, and this is the "gate of Heaven."

Let us consider how we behave when we are admitted into the presence of a Superior, of whom we have a request to make, and whose refusal or compliance will be attended with loss, or productive of advantage. Do we sit down careless and unconcerned,

not regarding what he says, and behaving with evident
marks of disrespect and uneasiness? Do we seem vis-
sibly weary of his company, and openly acknowledge
the irksomeness of his presence? And when he assures
us of his disposition and power to serve us—when he
treats us with the kindness of esteem, and the warmth
of friendship, do we return his civilities with the cold-
ness of indifference, and the mortification of disdain?
On the contrary, do we not express by our looks, de-
clare by our words, and demonstrate by our actions,
our attachment to his person, and our regard to his
interest? Do we not shew by our behaviour, our sens-
of his kindness, and how highly we value the favor he
has conferred? And is the obligation one man can
confer on another, to be compared with the mercies we
supplicate and receive from God? Does the distinction
between one mortal and another merit greater hono
and reverence, than our Almighty Creator merits
us all? How ought we to carry ourselves then in
His Divine Presence, and in the house appropriate

to His worship? Ought we not there to collect our wandering thoughts and fix them upon God? Ought we not to be careful both what we think, and how we behave, lest instead of obtaining a blessing, we bring on ourselves a curse? Our congregations ought to exhibit an assembly of people met for the sole purpose of worshipping God, of begging His blessing, of deprecating His vengeance. Every look, every gesture, every posture in which we stand, or sit, or kneel, should express our sense of God's awful presence. And instead of suffering our minds to be employed either about business or pleasure, we should attend entirely upon the service in which we appear to be engaged — whether it be prayer, thanksgiving, reading, or hearing the word delivered by the minister. But it is not uncommon to hear many people, as soon as they go out of church, declare, that, instead of attending to the prayers and the sermon, they have been thinking upon very different subjects. This may appear a trifling circumstance; but it is the greatest insult that can be shewed

to God and His worſhip. It is "drawing near to "Him with your lips, while your hearts are far "from Him—it is appearing to men to pray, but "it is being within full of hypocriſy"—of hypocriſy towards God. "And an hypocrite," it is ſaid, "ſhall not ſtand before Him. Holineſs becometh "the houſe of God;" and when we approach to worſhip the Lord, it ſhould be "with an holy worſhip"—our hearts ſhould accompany our tongues in the celebration of religion.

I now proceed to take notice of the errors obſervable in our congregations. I mention firſt the manner in which ſome people come into church; they appear quite careleſs and indifferent; when they get to their ſeats they ſit down with as much unconcern, as if the buſineſs they came about were of no conſequence. Let me recommend it, earneſtly recommend it, to every perſon, rich and poor, young and old, as ſoon as you get to your reſpective places, to "fall meekly upon "your knees," and to beſeech Almighty God to accept

your prayers and devotion, to grant a blessing to what the minister is about to deliver, and to bring it home to your consciences. Let me beg of you all to make use of such a prayer every time you come into the church, and let me prevail with you to teach your children one likewise. Such a behaviour would be devout and respectful; we should then appear like what we are, a congregation of fallen creatures supplicating salvation of our Almighty Creator. But there is one thing I would recommend before you come into church; consider into whose house, and for what purpose you are coming. And when you enter the Church yard, look with serious reflections on the graves, the repositories of the silent dead; consider that you may never be permitted to walk amongst them again, and that the very next grave that is opened, may be for yourselves. Such reflections will suggest a reverend behaviour in the house of God.

(2) Many people come late into the church, and often not without making a prodigious

noise, so that not only the whole congregation is disturbed; but some, thoughtlessly and inconsiderately, whether they are engaged in prayer, or in attending to the word of God, instantly withdraw from their duty, and thus add to the noise and confusion already made. Now no person who considers he is supplicating a blessing from Almighty God, perhaps preservation "from sudden death or from eternal damnation," would presume either to rise from his knees or to cease offering his petition, because somebody at that time is going to his seat. One cannot but wish, if for no other reason, that people would be early in their attendance on the service of the Church.

I cannot here omit mentioning, that if the least noise be made either by the falling of a book, or any other little accident, how very anxious many people seem till they know what is the matter. Let your attention be fixed upon God and the salvation of your souls, and you will behave with more decency and reverence.

(3) There is a regulation, that it is much to be wished, was made in almost every congregation. The indecency, I believe, is only to be found, to our great reproach, in the church of England—I mean the shameful, the irreverent custom of praying to God in the indolent posture of sitting on our seats. Were a person taken in a country of savages, whose custom was to murder every one they apprehended, when they made signs to him that he was going to die, would he sit indolently down and carelessly ask them to spare his life? Would he not fall upon his knees and earnestly implore their mercy? How few shew the same solicitude for their eternal salvation—let this congregation bear witness!

Should any man, to excuse his want of devotion, fancy, that, tho' he repeats his prayers in a sitting posture, yet he prays in his heart, and hears what the minister prays, and observes and goes along with him, let him weigh well in his mind the direction of the Apostle, "glorify God in your body,

" as well as in your ſpirit, for both are God's."

Tho' God principally requires the heart, yet having made our bodies, an homage is due unto God from them. And be aſsured where " the heart is " right towards God," the faculties of the body will naturally follow, as far as it is in the power of the heart to command them.

Good men, in all ages, have not contented themſelves to worſhip God with good thoughts or inward motions only, but with the external acts of Religion— ſuch as either the inſtitution and practice of the Church, or the cuſtom of the Country had made external ſigns of honor, as uncovering the head, bowing the body, kneeling on our knees.

Nor has any age, I believe, of the chriſtian church produced men, who have betrayed ſuch ſlight thoughts of God and His Son Jeſus Chriſt as the preſent, in the careleſs and negligent way of worſhip to which many ſeem to have given themſelves up.

The diſsenters from the church, whenever they go

to prayers in their public meetings, all either fall upon their knees, or shew their reverence by standing up. And shall all other sects, when they pray in their public congregations, discover external marks of homage to God Almighty—and shall we, the members of the Church of England, the best of all Churches, consult our ease as if we were at home? This is a contempt of God, a disgrace to our Church, a scandal to our Religion, an offence to devout minds—and an ill example to all who observe or sit near you.

Let me observe further that, that frequent sitting during the time of Divine service, produces dronsiness and languor. And this is one cause why people sleep more in the Church of England, than they do in the meetings and conventicles of dissenters.

I have to add, that as many people may object they cannot kneel upon the bare ground, it is devoutly to be wished that those who are able would provide themselves, as they may do it at a trifling expence, with a base or hassock for the purpose—and that those who

are not able to procure them, might be supplied by the Parish. Your Church would then have much more the appearance of an house of God, than it has at present.

(4) I am next to take notice of the extreme impropriety of leaning against the Pews or Seats during the time of the reading the Psalms, and of the Prayers, by those who stand up, as tho' those persons were unable to support themselves. It betrays a shameful indifference for the worship and service of God. I mention this with the hope that I shall not have occasion to do it in future.

(5) Let me observe too, that a very disagreeable custom prevails of repeating aloud after the minister, those parts of the service in which the congregation should follow him only with the eye; to the great disturbance of those who sit near them, and often to the entire interruption of the minister. Sometimes they read too fast, and prevent others from understanding what he says. The Rubric directs where the people

should repeat; and where it gives no directions, it intends that the congregation should be silent, and listen to the minister.

(6) I would briefly mention another circumstance, which, tho' it may escape the observation of those who do it, ought, I think, to be suggested to them: those who bring Bibles generally look for the text; and they are often so long in finding it, that a part of the Sermon is finished before they have paid the smallest attention to it. Now the first part of the sermon is often an explanation of the text; and if people do not know the meaning of the text, they cannot profit much, I apprehend, by the discourse upon it.

(7) Let me mention further what has always given great offence to serious minds—the levity and foolish talking, to which some people addict themselves in the house of God. One would imagine they come with no other view than to make remarks on the dress, on the finery and folly of their neighbors. Is whispering, talking, laughing, seemly, do you think,

in God's presence? Let me beseech you to cease from so foolish, and so sinful a practice.

(8) Let me, lastly, take notice of another indecency committed chiefly by the younger part of the congregation—I mean the irreverent custom of rushing out of the church, almost before the service is concluded. Let me prevail with you all, and you who are fathers and masters more especially, to enjoin your children and servants, before they depart from God's house, to go reverently on their knees, and beseech God to forgive the wanderings of their hearts, and the coldness of their devotions; that "what they have heard "with their outward ears, may produce in them the "fruits of good living." Teach them then to depart like creatures who have been worshipping an Almighty God.

I will beg your patience a moment longer, whilst I make a short Application. Let me then request of you all, my Brethren, to think seriously, before you enter the Church, into whose awful presence you are

going. And when you have entered it, let me beseech you to fall meekly on your knees, to supplicate God's acceptance of your prayers, and to grant that the word to be preached may become "a savor of life unto life" to all that hear it. Let there be in future no noise made by your entering it. And whether you are reading or hearing the word, or offering up your prayers and thanksgivings, do not let any little disturbance, as the opening the door, or the falling of a book, withdraw your attention from your duty. Let this Church in future be distinguished by the reverence and devotion of all who frequent it—and let me hope that you will pay so much honor to Almighty God as to pray to Him, not in your present custom of sitting on your seats, or even the more decent one of standing up, but "meekly kneeling on your knees." And let all impertinent gazing at other people's dress—let all talking, whispering, and laughing be for ever banished from this holy place.—And instead of hastily departing before the Blessing is pronounced, let us return

thanks to God for the opportunity of attending His house and service, and beg His Grace to accompany it

May God Almighty grant that neither our negligence in frequenting this house of prayer, nor our contentions in rending and troubling it, nor our irreligion in polluting of it, may ever hinder the benefit we hope to reap in it, nor prevent His hearing all our prayers, which we put up in humility and reverence. But that the eyes of that gracious and holy God we come here to worship, may be opened day and night in this house of prayer, and His ears attentive to our petitions, and His hands open and ready to relieve our wants, and to bless us every Lord's day, and in all our weekly concerns to our lives end through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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Entered at Stationers' Hall.